

Strategies to Ease a Painful, Slow-to-Start Labor by Penny Simkin, PT

Are you having frequent, painful contractions, with or without back pain, that are accompanied by **NO** dilation? Perhaps you have seen your midwife or doctor and been told that this is pre-labor. You are not even in labor (that is, dilating) yet. Such an early labor is often very discouraging and exhausting.

What causes such a pattern? There are several possibilities:

- Your baby may be occiput posterior.
- You may have a scarred cervix (from previous surgery, a biopsy, etc.).
- Your cervix may still be long, unripe, and/or posterior.
- You may be tensing your muscles or worrying a great deal about the labor, your baby, or something else.
- Several of the above factors may be occurring at the same time.

What to do. This is a reminder list. You should have learned these things in class:

- If possible to sleep, or doze between contractions, do so. Otherwise try interspersing restful activities (massage, music, guided imagery or visualizations) with distracting activities.
- Continue to eat and drink (high carbohydrate, low fat food and beverages).
- Try distraction (baking bread, visiting with friends, shopping).
- If contractions are too frequent and too painful for you to get relief from any of the above, try conscious tension release (the “roving body check,” using slow breathing as a way to release tension).
- Especially if you have back pain and irregular contractions, try the open knee-chest position for 30 to 45 minutes (using pillows and your partner to help you stay in the position). If the baby is posterior, this position may help to “back” the baby’s head out of the pelvis, giving it a chance to reposition before coming down again. Contractions may even stop for a while.
- Try abdominal lifting during contractions (lifting your belly while bending your knees). This may realign the baby more favorably with your pelvis and reduce some of your pain.
- If you want to slow down or stop the contractions to possibly get some rest, you might try a bath of deep warm water. Do not do this until it is clear that your labor is not progressing, you are very tired, and you cannot sleep outside the bath.
- Your caregiver can arrange a drug-or alcohol-induced rest if the above are unsuccessful and you become exhausted and discouraged.

This kind of start to your labor does not mean that the rest of your labor will continue to be this slow and frustrating. By 4 or 5 centimeters, chances are that progress will normalize. Try not to get too discouraged.